SPORT

Popovic says Australia must improve after Venezuela defeat

HOUSTON: Coach Tony Popovic acknowledged his World Cup-bound Australia side need to make improvements after the Socceroos suffered a 1-0 friendly loss to Venezuela in Houston on Friday.

Jesus Ramirez scored the only goal of the game seven minutes before halftime when he pounced inside the six-yard box to convert Ender Echenique's low cross from the right and condemn Popovic's side to a second consecutive defeat.

"There's a lot we have to assess, but in the end, we're disappointed we lost the game," said Popovic, whose side lost 2-1 in their previous outing against the United States in October.

"We were probably a little bit too open. Venezuela, technically, were very good and were able to get into our box, and obviously scored a goal, but it was a little bit too easy on our part.

"We know we have to be better, but that's part of what we're doing here and part of the process."

Preparing for the Australians' sixth consecutive appearance at the World Cup, Popovic fielded an experimental side as he continues to assess his squad ahead of the finals in the US, Canada and Mexico.

The head coach gave international debuts to four players, including Melbourne City goalkeeper Patrick Beach, and the 22-year-old intervened on several occasions to keep Australia in contention.

"It's disappointing not to get the result, the win," said Beach. "That's what we try to do in every game. I thought we played very well in certain patches. Venezuela had the ball a lot of the time and we dug in deep and defended really well but unfortunately we couldn't get the result.

"Pretty busy in the first half and had a save early in the second half. I was really happy that I was able to make those saves for the team and help them out when I was called upon."—Reuters

No player assured of spot in US World Cup squad, says Pochettino

NEW YORK: US coach Mauricio Pochettino has warned players that "no one can feel safe" about their chances of making the final squad for next year's World Cup on home soil.

The US, who have already qualified for the 2026 World Cup as co-hosts of the tournament alongside neighbours Mexico and Canada, host Paraguay and Uruguay in a pair of international friendly matches this month.

Pochettino's side will be without the injured duo of attacker Christian Pulisic and midfielder Tyler Adams, affording the Argentine manager an opportunity to assess his options ahead of the World Cup.

"For me these are the players that today, they deserve to be here and are the players that we want to see, are the players that are our choice, our selection," Pochettino told reporters on Friday.

"And then no one can feel safe or no one can feel that they're going to be [on the roster], even the names that you say: [Christian] Pulisic or Tyler Adams. I think the federation is bigger than the names that [are in] the national team."

AC Milan's Pulisic opted to skip the matches against Paraguay and Uruguay after suffering a low-grade injury to his right hamstring during the United States' 2-1 win in a friendly against Australia last month.

"[Pulisic] was perfect when he played against Australia, but that happened and we see what happened," Pochettino said. "The most important thing is that all the players arrive fit in a very good condition the day that we are going to start the World Cup, or maybe a little bit before because I need to prepare the roster."—Reuters

LUANDA: Argentina's Lionel Messi (C) vies for the ball against Sacalumbo Francisco (L) of Angola during their international friendly at the Estadio Nacional 11 de Novembro on Friday. Messi created the first goal and scored the second as the world champions won 2-0 in a match that marked 50 years of the independence for hosts Angola. Miami-based Messi set up Lautaro Martinez to put the Albiceleste ahead on 44 minutes. The roles were reversed after 82 minutes with Martinez the creator and Messi the scorer. Martinez beat 39-year-old goalkeeper Hugo Marques at his near post and Messi struck with a shot into the far corner of the net. The match was Argentina's only fixture of the international window, while Angola look ahead to the start of next month's Africa Cup of Nations where they are in a group with Egypt, South Africa and Zimbabwe.—AFP

Croatia qualify for World Cup, Dutch move closer

PARIS: Croatia booked their ticket to the 2026 World Cup in North America with an unconvincing 3-1 win over the in-form Faroe Islands on Friday as the Netherlands all but booked their spot in the finals too.

Germany's qualification hopes still rest on their final Group 'A' match on Monday at home to Slovakia despite a Nick Woltemade brace giving them a laboured 2-0 win at Luxembourg.

After Geza David Turi had given the Faroes a shock lead, strikes from Josko Gvardiol, Petar Musa and Nikola Vlasic in Rijeka handed 2018 World Cup finalists Croatia their ticket to the finals in Canada, Mexico and the United States.

Victory gave Croatia a six point lead over the Czech Republic at the top of Group 'L' with just a single game left to play.

"For Croatia, for the fans!" a jubilant Gvardiol posted on his X account.

But it was a night when the underdogs struck fear into more illustrious opponents, although without managing to strike a telling blow.

The Faroes, who were on a three-match winning run and still harboured faint hopes of qualification, had the audacity to take the lead against opponents who only needed a draw to progress.

Turi picked up the ball just inside the Croatia half and strode forwards unmolested before trying his luck from outside the box and benefiting from a heavy deflection to beat Dominik Livakovic in the Croatia goal on 16 minutes.

The lead lasted only seven minutes before Manchester City defender Gvardiol lashed in an equaliser after some hesitant Faroes defending.

With the evergreen Luka Modric still pulling the strings in Croatia's midfield at 40 on the occasion of his 193rd cap, the hosts gradually took control.

And 12 minutes into the second half, Musa fired in at the near post to settle Croatian nerves.

With the Faroes' hopes of becoming the smallest ever nation to reach a World Cup fading fast, Vlasic drove the knife in deeper still 20 minutes from time with a cushioned volley to beat goalkeeper Mathias Lamhauge, who had strayed into no-man's land.

Also in the group, Liam Jessop's 20th-minute strike threatened to give Gibraltar a first ever victory — or even draw — in a major tournament qualification match, but Vasilije Adzic and Nikola Krstovic ensured Montenegro avoided a shock defeat to triumph 2-1.

RIJEKA: Croatia's Nikola Vlasic (second L) scores during the 2026 FIFA World Cup qualifier against the Faroe Islands at Stadion HNK Rijeka.—Reuters

Memphis Depay's Dutch record-extending 55th international goal helped push the Netherlands to the brink of qualification with a 1-1 draw in Poland.

Jakub Kaminski had given Poland hope of pipping Ronald Koeman's Netherlands to top spot in Group 'G' two minutes before the break in Warsaw, latching onto Robert Lewandowski's through ball to slot past Bart Verbruggen in the Dutch goal.

But two minutes after the restart, Depay struck to maintain the Netherlands' three-point lead at the top of the group, and a massive goal difference advantage of 13 that makes qualification at home to Lithuania on Monday a formality.

"I am more disappointed than happy but on the other hand we made another step toward qualification," Koeman said. "It is not easy to play against teams who defend very deep. We had to be patient, we had to try to attack in different ways, but we did not create enough good opportunities."

The other group match saw Malta snatch their first win in 2026 World Cup qualifying, converting their only shot on target to stun Finland 1-0 in Helsinki. Midfielder Jake Grech came off the bench in the 79th minute and scored the decisive goal three minutes later from the edge of the area.

In Group 'A', plucky Luxembourg gave Germany plenty of scares in a goalless first half before Newcastle forward Woltemade bagged a second-half brace to keep Germany top of the pool.

"I know it wasn't a pretty game but we gave our all, pushed hard and got the three points," Woltemade told Germany's RTL network.

The four-time world champions need only a point at home to Slovakia on Monday to book their ticket to the World Cup.

Their nearest rivals, Slovakia, had two goals chalked off by VAR but Tomas Bobcek struck in injury time in Kosice to snatch a 1-0 victory over Northern Ireland.

Slovakia, though, must win in Germany on Monday to top the group and avoid the play-offs.—Agencies

After two years, PCB announces FRCA office-bearers

By Our Sports Reporter

LAHORE: After two years, the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) on Saturday finally issued a notification regarding the elected body of the Faisalabad Regional Cricket Association (FRCA), declaring that Mohammad Anis Ahmed and Rana Mohammad Saeed Akhtar were elected as FRCA president and secretary, respectively, unopposed.

The elections were held in May 2023 but the opponent candidates took the case to the court which referred the case back to the PCB in 2024 with necessary instructions.

The case remained pending for one year with the PCB, which could not take any decision in this regard because it did not have its election commission.

In September this year, the PCB appointed Mansoor Qadir as the election commissioner who announced the elected body of the FRCA.

"In pursuance of the judgement dated Nov 10, 2025 passed by an independent adjudicator of the PCB in an appeal titled "Mohammad Anwar vs Pakistan Cricket Board etc" the following are hereby notified as office-bearers of RCA Faisalabad: Mohammad Anis Ahmed (president unopposed), Rana Mohammad Saeed Akhtar [secretary unopposed]," read a notification issued by the PCB election commission.

Meanwhile, the elected bodies of the Sialkot and Multan associations are yet to be notified as their affairs are being handled by the PCB itself.

Asjad, Hasnain make strong start at IBSF World Cup

MUSCAT: Pakistan cueists Asjad Iqbal and Mohammad Hasnain won their respective opening matches at the IBSF Snooker World Cup in Muscat on Saturday.

Asjad — the 2024 national champion — defeated Egypt's Mohamed El-Hamy 3-1 in a match where the former compiled two significant breaks.

The 35-year-old Asjad sealed the first frame with a 76-break and took the fourth frame with a 55 clearance on his way to an 89(76)-17, 42-57, 62-48, 69(55)-48 victory.

Hasnain, who failed to impress in the recently concluded world snooker championship, exiting in the first round, also secured a 3-1 win, overcoming Turkiye's Enes Bakirci.

After dropping the first frame, the 16-year-old Hasnain claimed three in a row (43-72, 85-33, 76-42, 61-52).

The tournament features 68 players divided into 17 groups. The top two players from each group will advance to the knockout round after the initial round-robin stage.—Agencies

Mehreen helps Pakistan outclass SL

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan outplayed Sri Lanka by 211 runs in the inaugural Blind Women's T20 World Cup at the BOI Cricket Ground in Colombo on Saturday.

Sri Lanka's decision to bowl first proved quite costly as Pakistan's opening pair produced a record-breaking batting display that dominated the innings from start to finish.

Leading from the front, Mehreen Ali produced an exceptional innings, scoring an unbeaten 230 runs off 78 deliveries to establish a new world record for the highest individual score in women's T20 international blind cricket. She was ably supported by Hooria Malik, who contributed a solid 69 not out off 49 balls.

Their partnership enabled Pakistan to post an imposing total of 331-0 in the allotted 20 overs.

In response, Sri Lanka managed to post 120-3 off the stipulated overs.

For Pakistan, Noor Fatima, Hooria and Sumera Malik took a wicket apiece. Mehreen Ali was declared player-of-the-match.—APP

Parker denies taking prohibited substance

WELLINGTON: Former world heavyweight boxing champion Joseph Parker on Saturday denied taking a prohibited substance after failing a doping test, expressing confidence an investigation would clear his name.

The 33-year-old New Zealander, whose whereabouts were unclear, failed the test on the day he fought and lost to Britain's Fabio Wardley last month, said his promoter, Frank Warren's Queensberry Promotions. British media said he had tested positive for traces of cocaine and could face a lengthy ban from the sport.

"Before my recent fight I took a voluntary test and have now been informed that it returned an adverse result. This came as a real surprise to me," Parker said in a statement on Instagram.

"I did not take any prohibited substance... I am cooperating fully with the process now underway, and I am confident the investigation will clear my name."

Parker won the WBO heavyweight title in 2016 by defeating Mexican Andy Ruiz. He lost the title to Britain's Anthony Joshua in 2018. He had held the WBO interim heavyweight title since March last year after defeating China's Zhang Zhilei.—Reuters

VALENCIA: Gresini Racing's Alex Marquez (L) rides in front of Red Bull KTM Factory's Pedro Acosta during the sprint race of the Valencia MotoGP at the Ricardo Tormo racetrack on Saturday.—AFP

Alex Marquez eases to sprint victory at Valencia Grand Prix

VALENCIA: Alex Marquez claimed a dominant victory in the final sprint of the MotoGP season in Valencia on Saturday, his third such triumph of 2025.

The Ducati-Gresini rider, who has sealed second in the overall standings behind his champion brother Marc, beat out KTM's Pedro Acosta by 1.149 seconds, while Fabio Di Giannantonio finished third.

Home favourite Marquez started from second on the grid behind Marco Bezzecchi but took the lead at turn one and never relinquished it.

The Italian also sank behind Acosta, who zipped into second place at turn two, eventually finishing fifth.

However despite a disappointing outing it was enough for Bezzecchi to wrap up third place in the championship under grey skies in Valencia and give Aprilia their first top-three finish.

Two-time MotoGP champion Francesco Bagnaia has struggled in recent weeks and dropped to fifth in the standings behind Acosta as he came in 14th in the sprint on his Ducati.

Marquez said he would try win the Grand Prix on Sunday to complete a first weekend double triumph.

"It's one of those goals that is there but has never quite come together," he told DAZN. "In Malaysia in 2023, I missed out on Sunday, and the other day in Portimao, [and] Montmelo, I think that was the clearest opportunity.

"Here, it's true that I didn't expect to win today, there were stronger riders than me, but we managed to put together an almost perfect race. So tomorrow, we have to try to take a step forward in the warm-up, and from there, we'll see what happens."

Jorge Martin, the championship winner in 2024, brought up the rear in 22nd as he made his comeback following a fractured collarbone in September.

Last year's event in Valencia was cancelled because of the deadly flooding in the region.—AFP